

Wrap-up: What We Have Learned

PANEL:

Dennis Keeney, Director, Leopold Center

David Topel, Dean, ISU College of Agriculture

LeRoy Stoltenberg, President, Iowa Pork Producers Association

DENNIS: We're excited that so many producers have been willing to spend the day talking about these issues with us. I learned today that there are many more ways to grow a pig than I have previously appreciated. We're going to hear some wrap-up from LeRoy Stoltenberg and David Topel. LeRoy is on the family farm; he's from Scott County. He says that traveling is a major part of his job as IPPA President. He's served in a number of capacities for the IPPA. He and his wife Alice operate a farrow to finish swine operation that produces 1800 head a year, and he produces 160 of corn and 60 acres of soybeans. He's no stranger to the technologies we've talked about today. He's used some of them for several years.

David Topel is a Wisconsin native, so we share some memories and interests. He first came to the ISU animal science faculty in 1967. He's a strong promoter of ISU, of agriculture and of the Leopold Center, which we appreciate very much. He's also been instrumental in developing a lot of Iowa's international contacts and programs, and this will be very important in the coming years as we look beyond our borders. We appreciate it that both of these people were willing to spend the day with us.

LEROY: Today's topic, managing alternative pork production systems, makes me ask: What's actually alternative? Maybe some of the much younger producers here today don't remember pasture farrowing, but many of us do remember. We either helped on a neighbor's operation or on own operations, or with our dads, before we moved into confinement type situations. To me, pasture farrowing and alternative pork systems require different management skills than a turnkey total confinement operation. Those of us who did some pasture farrowing in the past and still have some of those skills may want to move back—but I don't mean moving back away from something's that's better, but in the sense of being financially able to raise more hogs without putting up high-cost confinement buildings.

As for myself, I started pasture farrowing in 1974 when I came back to the farm. Dad had pasture farrowed; he built a hog farrowing barn in '62 or '63. He used it one spring and was dissatisfied with it, so he went back to pasture farrowing. That shows the difference between where indoor technology was then and where it is now. I moved away from pasture farrowing in '79 to raised crates and a scraper system in an old barn that I remodeled. I have put only two new buildings on my farm that weren't there on the old home place. One is a sow gestation barn that is an open building, and the other is a lean-to onto this barn that is used as a nursery. We went to raised crates, and Stan Curtis gave some of the real reasons why we moved away from pasture farrowing. One of them was land cost; the other was labor. We went through two rainy falls and I can remember spending 10-12 hours a day in '77 just taking care of sows on what should have been a pasture but what was a deep mud yard. There was very little grass left, and it took a lot of time. In '79 we had a lot of rain again, and I decided then to move farrowing indoors.

With some of the genetics we have nowadays, pigs still probably have the instinct to nest and go back into pasture farrowing, but I question it a little when someone says that they definitely have to be in straw bedding to be comfortable. I've got genetics that have been raised on concrete for generations, and I don't see nesting frustration in those sows and gilts in the crates when they're having pigs. I usually move my sows into the crates at least a week prior to farrowing, and they lie down and have pigs in fine shape. I have yet to use oxytocin. If they're properly nourished and managed, they have pigs just fine.

One of the most critical things about pasture farrowing is parasite control. It's critical in any system, but especially in pasture farrowing. As for social grouping of sows, I think that's very important with outdoor systems, whether it's outdoor gestation or pasture farrowing. We use a feeding system with fenceline bunks. We feed every other day, full feed for two days on the second day. We have very little problem with tails, or with sows biting each other, as well as very little problem with "boss" sows. It's very manageable to do outdoor systems.

As for using and remodeling old buildings, basically, that's my production system. You have a lot lower costs than putting up new buildings. Structurally sound buildings can be remodeled very efficiently. I would say that some farmers have had problems, so it's good to ask a lot questions about ventilation systems. Do your research and get a system that you're sure will work for your buildings.

What intrigues me the most about today's conversations are those about hoop structures. I think maybe about seven years ago they came on the scene at the State Fair and Pork Expo; I thought it was quite a system and I've watched it to see if I might be interested. Over the years, it's pretty much proven itself. I listened to part of today's session about it. The farmers on the panel (see p. 75) have some real experience. Contact those folks and get advice and information.

As for deep bedding, some people question whether it works. But the folks talking about it (see p. 88) are having a lot of success with it in their hoop structures. One building on my farm is a huge old cattle shed; the peak of the building is probably close to 50 feet high. We have four sections in that building that are approximately 40 feet long and 14 feet wide. We run groups of hogs in those four sections. We still pick a lot of ear corn, so when we shell corn during the summer, those buildings are empty for two or three months. We finish on dirt lots for about two months (or three) during the summer and we put those corn cobs in there. The building has about a two-foot base of corn cobs on top of concrete. In the fall, when we start filling that building with hogs again, we put a layer of straw on. In the winter we use big round cornstalk bales and just let the hogs get them apart. We don't clean the building until spring, and it works very well.

As IPPA President, I'd like to touch on some other things. I want to impress upon you here today that for any producer scared that he can't compete, there's a place for anyone in the future, with exports moving up. Last year alone, exports were well over 70 percent higher than the year before. We have a vast market out there among other countries. We don't have to convince them to eat pork; pork is the meat of choice in many other countries. We still have to convince our own customers that it's the best product out there, but there's a tremendous demand overseas and with the population explosion overseas, as long as we keep free trade, there's going to be a demand for pork.

Another thing we hear a lot about is corporations crowding out the smaller farmers because you can't compete. We know you can compete: you just need good records to know where you're at—to know what you need to get out of your operation, how much money you need to live on, how well you want to live, and how much of that has to come off your hog operation. Then you'll know what *size* you need to be in order to compete.

Dermott Hayes did a study recently here at ISU comparing the mega production operations and how fast they're coming on line, and what level of production they're

taking over from the people who are getting out of hogs, both in the nation and in the state of Iowa. He found that the mega corporations are not keeping up with the industry's attrition, whether they're retired folks or young folks who don't have the wherewithal or the finances to stay in the business. So the mega corporations are NOT keeping up with the people leaving the industry, and there's a lot of room out there for the future of the pork producer, in Iowa or any of state. So don't get discouraged, folks, because there's lots of opportunities. You just need to know what you're doing, how you're doing it, and make sure you're doing it right so you can be profitable.

DAVE: Thanks, LeRoy, and a special thank you to everyone who participated in the program today, and those of you who came to participate in the discussions. The afternoon discussions were the highlight of the day for me. After the first discussion I went to (hoops), one of the producers I walked out with said, "I really feel good about this meeting. Now I know that I can compete with anyone." To me that's another highlight of this meeting. We shared thoughts, we helped each other, particularly farmer to farmer helping each other, and built confidence that there is a great opportunity for alternative swine production in our state—alternative production resulting in a significant profit. If you take the last 15 to 20 years in Iowa, the net return on investment for swine production is about 15 percent. That's a pretty good net return. And it's that great return that has stimulated a lot of the larger producers and investors in larger-producing units to advance and invest money in the pork industry.

I think we've almost gone through that cycle now. The next cycle is going to be good, solid people like yourselves, and other young people who want to get into the industry and start producing hogs, but probably in different ways than we have in the last five to seven years. This conference today has done a wonderful job of providing those alternative opportunities. It shows that you can do it without a lot of investment. So for the young people who were here, I think it was a stimulating experience.

I also learned today that these systems that we've heard about are not for everyone. I heard that statement four or five times today. You have to be a dedicated herdsman, a dedicated livestock person. And you have to be dedicated to agriculture. Through that dedication you overcome some of the benefits that larger operators may have: I mean simply they you're going to be a detail manager, and manage in such a way that you're going to have profit. In the last session I attended, one of the panelists said, "If I just worried about litter size, I wouldn't be here today. What I worry about are the profits."

And I'm making money." That's a significant statement. The bottom line is to manage so that you have a return on the investment.

Also, I heard a lot of good things about the environment today. LeRoy was talking before this session about how just this morning in the Iowa Legislature there was a discussion on the environment and livestock production, especially swine production. It's almost all negative talk. I didn't hear that at this conference. Here, I heard about systems that are environmentally sound, with friendly neighbors working together in a positive way to strengthen agriculture and particularly pork production.

Now we have to get this message out to more people. I was particularly pleased to see the number of journalists here today taking notes, and I hope you will take this opportunity to inform the public sector, not just the agricultural community, that we have alternative ways of raising pigs that are environmentally sound, returning nutrients to the soil in a positive way. If we can get this out to more of the public sector, it certainly will be helpful to the economic base of the state, which is so dependent on the pork industry.

I'm going to close with a little story. Dr. Stan Curtis this morning (see p. 20) talked about hog rings. My wife Jackie and I were traveling to Thailand. I was going to work with some pork producers there, and one asked me to bring along some hog rings and a snare. I put this in my wife's carry-on luggage. She had a little extra space. We got into New York City and went through security again. They said, "Lady, will you come over here on this side?"

I went through and they just said, "You can keep on going."

So there was Jackie standing there, and they took out the hog snare first and said, "What is this?"

She said, "It's a hog snare."

The guard said, "What do you do with it?"

She said, "You catch a hog by the nose."

He said, "Lady, I think you'd better come to the back room. We've got some things to talk about." I think they thought it was a pipe bomb or something like that. When she came out 15 minutes later, she said to me, "If you ever do that again . . ."
(laughter)

The point here is that people around the world still use this technology, and they still pasture their sows. It's different in Thailand, of course, because it's a hot, humid climate,

but they take advantage of their environment and also have good, sound production systems. It was wonderful to have the group here from Sweden today. Thank you for your help, your thoughts, and your suggestions. By working together around the world, we'll have a wonderful industry for years to come.

DENNIS: Are there any final comments or questions for the panel?

How would policies like those of (presidential candidate) Pat Buchanan affect the industry?

DAVE: An isolationist approach would hurt the pork industry, because GATT and NAFTA clearly benefit Midwestern agriculture. China alone is going to have to import a huge amount of pork in the next 20 years. They just don't have the capability to do it with their own systems. They have money now, and they like pork. And we'll be able to get into that market very effectively, even with fresh pork. But if we start having restrictions and one country bargaining against the other in trade deals, agriculture will lose. I think we can say (based on) a lot of data particularly from ISU's Center for Agricultural and Rural Development, that these agreements that were recently approved are helpful to Iowa agriculture.

DENNIS: Any other questions?

Are you going to do this again next year?

DENNIS: We were just talking about that. We'll come up with an answer pretty soon, but it looks like this might be something that would be good to follow up, because a lot of good things got started here today. What you're getting is a positive reaction, at least from one member of the Leopold Center staff.

LEROY: What does the audience think?

APPLAUSE